Love Actually: Reflections on the Importance of a Love Ethic in Practice

Abstract

Informed by the phrase bell hooks uses in her work on love and social justice (hooks, 2001: 22), this paper explores what a 'love ethic' looks like in a practice context. It explores the idea of 'professional love' (Page, 2011) and the ways in which this form of love is both expressed and performed at the Joanna Project, a faith-based initiative offering support to sex workers in Leeds. The Joanna Project embraces the idea of 'professional love' as a foundation of its practice, and consciously promotes a loving practice as central to their work. It is a faith-based project, operating outside of the confines of the statutory sector and because of this, can weave into its narrative a vocal, positive and performative 'love ethic'. The following discussion reflects on six interviews with the workers at the project, during which they were asked to reflect specifically on the importance of love in their professional lives. The research findings suggest that incorporating a discussion about the ways in which love is integrated into our practice is a necessary foundation for building authentic relationships, and radically transforming practice.

Key Words love, professional practice, support, dignity and respect

Introduction:

We spend so much time and headspace obsessing over meanings of romantic love, and fulfilment with the one special other, that to explore different meanings of love , for example those expressed by the Ancient Greeks provides a compelling antidote to the commodification of love that saturates our everyday. In this paper I will draw on the theory of *agape*, a relationship of deep affection, expressed as love. I will also briefly explore the way that political theory has embraced the term and framed it in a discussion about political solidarity in civil society (Iorio and Campello, 2013). *Agape* is underpinned by ideas of faithfulness, commitment, and love being a deliberate

choice and act of the will. In a world of declining levels of empathy for strangers, it is has the potential to be a radical sentiment (Greenway, 2016: 49)

What characterizes *agape* is that it is not primarily a love of the emotions, it is an intellectual action; a mindset, an orientation of the will to visibly 'see the other'. Writing in the introduction to *Che Guevara, Paulo Freire and the Pedagogy of Revolution,* Araújo Freire suggests that some forms of love be recognised as a political praxis with the suggestion that love is,

> "a feeling that, when deep and true in human beings, is not wasted on itself but opens possibilities for those who live it radically, both for reflections in the political and epistemological field and every day, ethical and generous praxes" (MacLaren, 2000: xiv)

I have been working with the Joanna Project over the last four years. My connection began with an evaluation of the project. Since completion of that piece of work I have continued my involvement with them by volunteering on outreach once a week. Staff and volunteers at the project are very liberal in their use of the word 'love' providing me with an opportunity to reflect on what a 'love ethic' may look like in practice.

The paper begins with some local context about the approach to sex work in Leeds. I then describe the Project, and ways in which love is integrated into the everyday practice. Finally, I offer some tentative conclusions about the importance of consciously focussing on the question of love and its place in personal and social transformation.

Methodology

The research for this paper was undertaken using an ethnographic approach. Whilst there is no one clearly defined, standard meaning of ethnography, for this piece of research I used the some of the accepted central features: studying people's actions in everyday contexts, collecting data from a range of sources, informal conversations and participant observation, data collection was relatively unstructured and interpretive categories emerged from the analysis of the data itself (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Fetterman, 2010).

My own position as researcher also requires some clarification. Prior to this research I had an established relationship with the project. In 2016 I undertook an evaluation which included spending time at Joanna House, observing everyday practices and 'helping out'. As part of this previous research I volunteered on their outreach programme in order to develop a relationship with the volunteers, but also to develop an understanding of the night-time economy and the world of street sex work through an engagement with the sex workers themselves. I have continued to volunteer despite concluding the original piece of research. My connection to the project thus positions me as a bit of a hybrid. The insider/outsider dichotomy is for me too crude in terms of its polarisation (Woodward, 2008). I am never fully either inside or outside. I am an insider in terms of the volunteering I undertake, which certainly makes further research easier in terms of gaining access, bringing greater intimacy and openness to the subsequent interviews. On the other hand, I am aware that my position may pose certain drawbacks in that there may be certain expectations of me to be more sympathetic to the project.

I am drawn to Maggie O'Neill's (2001) work on renewed methodologies where she calls for approaching research with a 'politics of feeling'. This includes having emotional identification and compassion for the participants, recognising the dual subjectivity of researcher and researched. In addition to the outreach sessions, I also do occasional days volunteering at Joanna House, making cups of tea and sometimes cooking for the service users, listening, chatting and simply being there. This activity privileges me with considerable 'insider' knowledge. Ultimately though the findings are filtered through my standpoint, but my interpretations are equally embedded in in my privileged access during the research process.

For this paper, in addition to the volunteering, I requested interviews with all of the workers at the project, six in all. I conducted four individual semi-structured interviews and one group interview, again using a semi-structured method. All of the interviews were recorded and transcribed. Data analysis of the semi structured interviews was undertaken using a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The thematic analysis highlighted key themes, such as trust, dignity, care respect, and love.

I draw heavily on the data in order to offer an insight into what constitutes a performative love ethic, in other words how meanings of love are interpreted and enacted on an everyday basis by the staff at the project. All the participants' voices are anonymised in accordance with Leeds Beckett research ethics, and where I quote participants, I do so verbatim, providing them all with unique identifiers.

The Local context of the Project

A new and innovative city-wide strategic partnership between Safer Leeds, Leeds City Council, West Yorkshire Police and third sector partners took shape in Leeds in 2014 (Brown and Moore, 2014). The aim of the partnership was to pioneer a new approach to street sex work. This included (but was not limited to): (i) the introduction of a dedicated sex work liaison officer; (ii) the pilot scheme of a managed approach to street sex work (October 2014–October 2015) in the industrial area where street sex work had taken place for over a decade; and (iii) enhanced safety work, including city-wide training and promotion of the 'National Ugly Mugs' safety scheme. Ugly Mugs is a pioneering, national organisation which provides greater access to justice and protection for sex workers who are often targeted by dangerous individuals but are reluctant to report these incidents to the police. The scheme enables sex workers to report crimes committed against them either anonymously or with full details shared with the police.

The Managed Approach functions with specific rules; agreed through consultation with residents, businesses and sex workers (as detailed in the Community Led Local Development Plan for Leeds South (LCC, 2016). The area comprises designated streets away from residential housing, where sex workers can 'operate' between the hours 8pm and 6am, without being cautioned or arrested for loitering or soliciting. This is a novel approach, in that a strategy of minimal enforcement of soliciting legislation has been supported by state agencies for the first time. Interestingly, this may be simply regarded as a formalisation of commonly occurring informal local practices of sporadic non-enforcement which operate in many towns and cities across the UK (Carline, 2009; Munroe and Scoular, 2012, Campbell, 2013). After regular monitoring and an independent evaluation (Sanders and Sehmbi, 2015), the Managed Approach was confirmed by the partners as an ongoing arrangement in

September 2015. In December 2015 the Managed Approach hit the headlines as a result of a murder. This led to increased scrutiny of the policy, and the Council agreed to a review of the practice. In 2019 the local community came together to put pressure on the local council to reconsider this srategy, and with support from the local MP, Hilary Benn, the protests have resulted in a larger consultation with all the key stakeholders (Johnson, 2019).

The Project

The Joanna Project is a small faith-based project located within the Managed Approach in Leeds. For the past 10 years, it has delivered street and more recently centre based services to sex workers. The centre provides long term support to the women and work alongside other support agencies for example, housing options, health professionals, drug and alcohol support services who come to Joanna House. The house is designed to be a daytime sanctuary, providing a place of safety for women whose lives are often complicated by multiple and complex needs, including insecure tenancies, violent and abusive relationships, poor mental health and poverty. During the day the women have access to hot drinks, meals, showers, clean clothes, and a clean, safe and comfortable environment. The project endorses a low threshold approach, it makes minimal demands on service users, offers support, without attempting to control the drug use of those who attend, and responds to the needs of the service users only when, and if requested (Hill & Laredo, 2019). This approach is an important component of the support and care. Furthermore, in keeping with this methodology there less focus on targets and outcomes, and a greater emphasis of providing the requisite levels of care. Inevitably this means the project can support their service users for as long the women themselves require, often over years.

The project operates a strict zero-tolerance policy to drug/alcohol on site, whilst at the same time there is a deliberate attempt to lower all other barriers to access. This has developed as a direct response to the multiple and complex needs of the women who access the service. It is clear is that the staff team understands both what motivates their service user group, but equally what deters them. Their knowledge is borne out of an approach that seeks to accompany the women who use the project:

as stated on their website, staff aim to ‘journey with women’ (Joanna Project, nd), rather than determine and define solutions. This enables women with highly complex problems, mental health issues and life-controlling addictions to make use of the project and all its facilities.

There is a clear intentionality to help the women who use the service, of their own volition, to develop an exit strategy from sex work, and out of the destructive, chaotic world of sex work. Its mission is premised on the belief that service users should not be judged by anyone other than God, and that each individual is a valuable, unique human being deserving of love, compassion and support (Joanna Project, nd). Each day promises a ‘fresh start’ for the women, however difficult this might appear. From this philosophy stems the ethics, values and founding principles that lonely, socially isolated and vulnerable women should receive high quality services that are neither time nor resource limited.

The lived realities of street sex workers

The precarious, complex and chaotic lives of those who are involved in on-street prostitution are well documented; difficulties include: violence, ‘problematic drug and/or alcohol use’, homelessness, ‘low self-esteem’, ‘harassment from police and communities’, criminalisation and ‘negative experiences of accessing statutory services’ (Pitcher, et al., 2006: 236). It is also well known that exiting prostitution is an exceptionally difficult and lengthy process, often involving periods of re-engaging in sex work and multi-agency support (Hester and Westmarland, 2004; Cusick et al., 2011).

Adding to these complexities are the mixed, often ambivalent views held by the public about sex workers, in particular street sex workers, the most visible group. According to Scrambler and Scrambler (1997:105), these women are generally described as being “amoral, conspicuously vulgar and indiscriminate, or as a lost and hopeless victims of abuse and manipulation.” This quote reveals the paradox in the manner in which sex workers are regarded: sometimes as architects of their own misfortune; alternatively, vulnerable women in need of ‘rescue’. O'Neill (2006) further highlights that, while sex work may be implicitly accepted in the UK, the embodied

figure of the sex worker is not, and as a result she suffers from indiscriminate exclusion, discrimination and marginalisation.

It is widely recognised that women's lack of economic choice is a key reason for entry into 'marginalised' lifestyles including street-based sex work and associated issues of homelessness and problematic poly drug use (Monroe, 2005; Sanders, 2005; Munro and Scoular, 2012). This is the understanding underpinning interventions at the Joanna Project and without explicitly engaging in political debates about the nature of sex work, their approach is informed by an view that street sex work is not a career choice for anyone. Furthermore, the project supports a position that sex work is exploitative and inherently violent and a consequence of structural, social and material inequalities (Bindel, 2017).The vision and identity of the project is informed by a set of Christian values, which intrinsically value all human life equally, and which also promotes a strong sense of social justice.

Findings 1: Everyday acts of kindness and love

I have previously written that the project operates with a 'consciously realised identity' (Laredo and Chiosso, 2018a) and that this is expressed at its clearest through the discourse of love that is imprinted on the project and woven through all that it does like a 'golden thread'. The idea of 'loving' as a conscious action was a clear theme, that emerged in all the interviews. There was a clear differentiation between liking and loving:

> "We might not always like the women, or what they do, but we do love them". (JH1)

There was agreement between all of the participants when asked about how the practice of love is embedded that this was based on a conscious choice to love. One of the reasons was to model behaviour that actively shows:

> "I see you, and that you mean something to me". (JH2)

This reflects the view that love goes beyond the simple act of caring for, to reach another dimension, and one that begins the long and difficult process of breaking down the hierarchies and taxonomies that have previously dominated (hooks,2001: 77)

Participant 3 was very clear about the purpose of the work and where love fits into the practice:

> "We believe all women are loved by God and no-one is beyond hope. It is our Christian faith that underpins all that we do. We aim to demonstrate God's unconditional love in the way we treat each woman with dignity and respect". (JH3)

There is a very real and palpable emphasis on showing this love by way of physical embrace and human touch. All the participants felt a touchstone of their practice was to model loving behaviour by showing, and even by regularly repeating "I love you" (JH5). They reasoned that as most of the service users are estranged from their families, or have complex relationships with them, that one of the things they are trying to demonstrate is how to model positive and healthy relationships in the place of unhealthy toxic ones. The project identity embraces the idea that love is the necessary condition for the daily work of the project. In her work on early years workers, Page (2011) has called this a 'pedagogy of love', and clearly articulates the importance of a loving practice as being central to the work in early years:

> "… to deny the place of love is to deny what lies at the heart of human existence; further justification perhaps of why I firmly believe that love really does matter; never more so than to our youngest children who need love and affection to help their minds, bodies and souls grow strong, to be equipped to learn and to be emotionally resilient throughout their whole lives." (Page, 2018: 313).

Whilst this may look different with babies and small children, the same ideas are present for the support staff at the Joanna Project. For all of the participants the need to build loving relationships was a recurring theme. I was told firmly:

> "this love is not the mushy stuff, but it's about being there, in the mess, offering a gritty love, that says, you are someone, you mean something, I care about you". (JH1)

The most notable and dominant idea was of the therapeutic and healing power of love, the idea that love itself can restore a life that has been damaged through trauma and the lack of love:

> "we restore life through our passion to deliver effective and compassionate services, treating everybody equally, not judging, and offering a safe comfortable and homely environment in which everybody feels valued and safe". (JH2)

One of the challenges in working with sex workers is that their everyday exposure to violence coupled with their lack of love for themselves means their positive experiences of love are limited. As hooks explains (2001: 144), “if we have not been for themselves guided on love’s path for most of our lives, we usually do not know how to begin loving”. The participants talked a lot about the importance of love as a way to break down the barriers to the women. It was felt that one of the ways that this was achieved was by sharing personal information (within limits) about their own lives with service users (e.g. what they are doing, where they are going on holiday. This time spent ‘doing nothing’, ‘just chatting’(JH4) was felt to be very important, commented on frequently and recognised as the cornerstone of their relational practice. Another participant emphasised ‘the important part of the ebb and flow of a ‘normal’ loving relationship.’ (JH1). Reinforcing this another commented that:

> “This is the relational thing, sitting here with a cup of tea, just chatting, well that’s what it is, a normal part of everyday life, and you know, gaining trust and building relationships take time, but you know these women want someone to love, they need someone to love, and if we can show them our love it helps them to realise they too have a lot of love to give.” (JH4)

I was interested to explore how in practice this ‘love’ is manifested. In their interviews, the participants stressed time and again the relational nature of the work they do and building loving, trusting relationships takes time. No explicit demands are made on the women who use the service, other than they treat each other with due dignity and respect. They are not allowed to use drugs whilst on the premises, but no-one will be turned away because they have used drugs or alcohol that day. If anyone is asked to leave because they have really done something ‘disrespectful’, they are welcomed back the next day, and it is clear that every day they can ‘make themselves anew’. I was told by one of the participants that is the essence of the loving framework:

> “If their behaviour is difficult, well… em, sometimes we don’t like it, but it doesn’t stop us from loving them, it’s part of what we do, the boundary thing, we need to challenge, to show our love and that we do care”. (JH1)

There is a clear understanding of the slow and painful steps to building trust in people, and that these relationships cannot be forced. It is a long and difficult process, often fraught with complex realities, such as homelessness, complicated

medical histories, poverty, interrupted education, but also frequently poor mental health. In moving out of lifestyles associated with street sex work women often encounter many barriers. Changes in external circumstances alone are not enough: changes to “their internal worlds” (JH4) are also required, and this is where the ‘pedagogy of love’ comes into play.

There are no timeframes for visits to the project: women will be seen and offered support for as long as they require it. They may drop out for periods of time but will always receive with a loving welcome on their return. To successfully offer the holistic and supportive, low threshold provision to the extent that it has, the project has avoided a more mainstream and traditional focus on targets and outcomes. Throughout the often long and difficult journey the project provides ‘emotional support, friendship and community’(JH1). The support on offer is characterised by acceptance, genuineness and empathic understanding.

Findings 2: A Safe Space

The project offers a safe space during the day for sex workers to come and rest, relax, feel safe and loved. Gaining trust and building authentic loving relationships from women who are more used to being abused takes time. The importance of building a trusting relationship with the service users was emphasised in all of the interviews, and all participants agreed that the basis of this relationship was “knowing each and every one of the women” (JH3). Time is spent chatting, not auditing or checking up, but having ‘normal, everyday chats about life and love’(JH2). I have been present where conversations ranged from the mundane and every day to the tragic and traumatic, with everything in between. One minute it is a conversation about a beloved pet, and the next about a woman being held hostage. It is in these comfortable and comforting spaces that worries can be expressed, inserted into gaps in the gentle easy ebb and flow of everyday conversation. Questions about choices and lifestyles come not in an abrupt or interrogatory manner, rather as an expression of concern. Simple everyday questions, such as “where were you? how have you been?” (JH2) are used to help knit together a feeling of a caring and loving community, where people’s presence is valued. It was summed up like this:

> “It’s really important just to know that someone cares, that the person in front of you matters that they are valued, and that their life has meaning”. (JH6)

It was clear from the similarity of their responses that the project identity is a massive force in guiding and shaping the work they do. The identity has been developed with a clear intentionality to recreate familial bonds in order to be able to challenge the more toxic street level behaviours (the squabbles the fights, the jealousies and the unhealthy relationships), and by slowly building a relationship of trust, staff are able to challenge unwanted behaviours and are able to say,

> “no don’t talk like that or by saying no don’t just take things, ask us and we will give you what you need”. (JH3)

> “Most families bring their children up with a firm set of values for example, and in this family, we are kind to people. And this is how we do that here”. (JH1)

The team understands the chaotic lives of the service users, and that because of their histories of substance misuse the relationships they maintain with family or friends outside the project might be limited or contingent on their behaviour. Hence they try to provide the kind of care “a mum or a sister or a close friend might” (JH5).

An example of this is the celebrating of birthdays, not only of the women, but also of their children, from whom they are frequently separated, or with whom they have little or no contact. The significance of these small acts is to reinforce the importance of shared memories. These are the things families do for one another, they help create memories. Drawing from his experience of growing up in care, the poet Lemn Sissay (2012) reminds us that families – good or bad – are meaningful precisely because they act as a repository of memories. These help us, providing us with necessary reference points (like our birthdays), and remind us we are part of something bigger than ourselves.

Another important theme that came out of the interviews was the importance of building positive relationships. All of the participants spoke about the importance of the project being ‘relational’, meaning fostering and maintaining positive and healthy relationships with the service users comes before anything else. This does not mean staff don’t challenge the service users and will accept them on any terms; rather, that through their experience of working alongside this client group, they have a very

good understanding of the fragility of these women's lives and complexity and depth of their support needs. The essence of what is on offer is that the project is a safe place, where the women come to be nurtured, and through the active modelling of caring behaviour, or what I have named as an 'ethic of love', that the women who use the service feel loved, respected and above all cared about. The words that came up most frequently in the interviews were trust, safety, care, dignity, respect and love.

> "Over time we learned that despite our will, kindness can't fix everything. This seems to be a valuable lesson but knowing that you are doing your best and not out of duty, but out of love". (JH5)

The idea of the project as a 'safe holding space' is one that is important to the staff team. They are not working in a therapeutic environment, nevertheless the work is strongly influenced by ideas which suggest that the therapeutic relationship (Finlay, 2015) is one that offers space for healing transformation and growth. This is done simply and without fanfare or fuss, by offering tea, cake and comfortable spaces for sitting, where workers can sit with and be present with the women who come in to use the service. Most of us cherish the idea of being loved aspire to being connected to others in such a way as to say we matter to them, that the relationship is important and will hold us when we most need it (Sissay, 2019). Very often it is in these quiet moments, in the living room, in the act of sitting, or of sharing a meal, the idea of 'seeing', of being fully present for another that the *agape* love is on offer. The staff team work very hard on offering an 'emotional holding service' (Gravell, 2010), described as follows in one of the interviews:

> "It feels like a life time's work to put people back together again but you can't. You're there to hold them when they are broken - the humpty dumpty thing". (JH1)

Gravell's notion of idea of 'holding' is crucial to the construction of the 'safe space'. In this safe space time can be devoted to building healing relationships, whereby the service users feel valued, listened to and connected to others. The importance of connection cannot be understated, and extends even to the physical and there is an emphasis on the importance of touch; and the need for soothing comforting and hugging. The physical nature of support was felt to add another dimension and becomes reinforcement of the love and care that exists in the spaces between.

Joanna House has been designed to offer restorative care, it is a place characterised by warmth and positivity, providing a different way of being, in order to allow for the process of recovery. The importance of the emotional holding cannot be under-estimated. Individuals who have experienced extreme pain, fear, desertion and anger will often find it difficult to think; they may find it particularly difficult to think about their emotions, which can remain completely exempt from consciousness, and hence unavailable for reflection (Gravell 2010). The 'holding' becomes a safe place for feelings that otherwise are likely to be experienced as overpowering, bewildering and leading to further damage (Finlay, 2015).

Self-care and resilience in the staff team

So far, I have focussed on everything that I see as positive in the approach the project has worked so hard to embed, but was interested whether any emotional cost was reported by the participants (Byrne et al., 2011; Kinman and Ledgetter, 2016; Baksi and Sürücü, 2019), given the intensity of the work, and high levels of support the workers provide.

Again, as with most of the key themes, there was a broad agreement that the work was "more than just a job, it was actual ministry"(JH3), which is in keeping with the Christian commitment of the project, and therefore a powerful way to embrace the commandment to 'love thy neighbour as thyself'(JH3). Although faith is clearly a primary motivator, neither the team nor the space feels overtly pious in its everyday work.

It is a small staff team that is bonded in their approach to provide an ethical practice suffused with love. The values of respect and love run deep, and are embedded into the everyday practises of the staff team, which also helps to reinforce the vision and values of the project. Work is shared horizontally across the team, deliberately so, meaning everyone can experience both the good, the success, but also the times when it is difficult. Clear communication between staff is prioritised, and just as there is a need to create a safe place for the service users, the project team equally felt there were no unsafe places for them either. They also practice an ethic of care towards one another, and I was told, by necessity they "have each other's backs" (JH4). The most important aspect of their teamwork was the need to be loving, kind

and forgiving towards each other. One of the key factors that helps them understand their work is precisely because of the value that is put on maintaining a loving discourse.

Theorizing Love

Love is primarily both a religious and ethical virtue; it is not that common to associate it with overt political narrative. Indeed, the political theorist Hannah Arendt is very wary of combining love and political theory. She kept her distance because as she argued (1998: 242), love is an intensely private, intimate connection to another, its very interiority divests it of an ability to look outwards, which for Arendt forms the essence of the political. Arendt holds that all kinds of love are based on sentiment and thus prone to emotional bias and passion and therefore antithetical to building bonds of solidarity and potentially even harmful to the political world. She makes this argument because she understands romantic love to be such a powerful force it obliterates the ability to see what is in front of us, rather we see from the same perspective as our beloved. Despite these issues with ideas of romantic love she suggests that we should all live by a code of solidarity and critical thinking, a mode of thought she refers to as *amor mundi*, love of the world. This love of the world makes public the otherwise private sphere of love, it offers a vision by which the neighbour and the world is loved in all their difference. *Amor mundi* is suggestive of a way of understanding the world as it is, and not falling victim to a romantic view of the world, or indeed that love can heal everything.

Love is a powerful emotion precisely because it allows us as individuals to go beyond ourselves and the limitations of our own experiences. Consideration from a different vantage point allows us, through a loving discourse, to form bonds of mutual regard by seeing the world outside of our limited self-interest. If, as Lebron argues (2017: 99), love entails a “willingness to reveal one’s own vulnerabilities and treat others’ vulnerabilities with kindness and a large heart”, then it might be that love also compels us to relinquish most aspirations for control. The Civil Rights Era placed an emphasis on love to promote racial justice. Lebron (2017, 99) argues “love was key to democratic redemption”, Martin Luther King, describes the white supremacist rule

of pre-Civil Rights America, as condition of “lovelessness” (King, 1967: 37), and argues that there is a need to reconcile the demands of love and power:

> “Power without love is reckless and abusive and … love without power is sentimental and anaemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice. Justice at its best is love correcting everything that stands against love.” (King, 1967: 37).

This reconciliation, if achieved, provides a platform to understand how and why certain choices are made. Other authors have recognised this need for communion with others, whilst at the same time underlining the importance of the radical nature and political force for good based on a discourse of love. (Fromm, 1995; hooks, 2001; Freire, 1993). For hooks, actively practising love can lead to greater levels of social justice, a loving praxis thus becomes a means of subverting the atomised, individualised nature that we have internalised, and she argues for a greater communion and suggests that ‘love as the practice of freedom’ can challenge the culture of domination (hooks, 2001). A more general politics of love connects politics to everyday lived experiences. It reminds us that the personal is political as feminists have long emphasised (Hanish,1970 in Crow, 2000). It steers us away from individualism and self-interest. A radical politics of love explains through a compelling economic/socio-cultural story how contemporary societies have become the way they are. Our societies lack love because of the structure of the economy, which harnesses exploitation and greed while also taking away the time that people need for truly loving relationships. Societies lack love because of an unequal social structure that leaves people wounded, lonely and distant from each other; and they lack love because of the patriarchal, white-supremacist and related oppressive forces that create conditions of violence, insecurity and distrust (hooks,2001).

Fromm (1995: 122) noted that the ‘social structure of Western civilisation and the spirit resulting from it are not ‘conducive to the development of love’. As hooks succinctly sums up: “Without justice there can be no love” (2001: 58). A radical politics of love is therefore bound to a commitment to redressing historical wrongs and other existing injustices.

Fromm (1995) describes love as an activity that requires a constant state of awareness and alertness to become capable of loving. Our capacity to love should not be separated between personal and social commitments:

> "If to love means to have a loving attitude towards everybody, if love is a character trait, it must necessarily exist in one's relationship not only with one's family and friends, but towards those with whom one is in contact through one's work, business, profession. There is no division of labour between love for one's own and love for strangers" (*op cit*: 101).

An ethic of love and care also acknowledges the need and longing for change in those social structures which support systems of race, gender, class, and heterosexist domination (hooks, 1994; 2001). hooks is clear about the role of *agape* in liberation struggles, and the need to connect and move ideas of love from the private and individual space. This framing of love as social transformation requires that we change the way we think by making a conscious decision to decolonise our thoughts in order to bring into existence new 'democratic' ways of being through the ethics of care, justice, unity and difference. With these ethical tools, love seeks to open up the possibility that we can be and live differently as subjects and communities making a conscious choice to affirm who we are without the need to commit to violence and domination against others who are different to ourselves. She argues that contemporary culture advocates a system of exchange around desire that mirrors the economics of capitalism;

> "Though many folks recognize and critique the commercialization of love, they see no alternative. Not knowing how to love or even what love is, many people feel emotionally lost; others search for definitions, for ways to sustain a love ethic in a culture that negates human value and valorises materialism" (hooks, 1994, p.246).

This theme can also be seen in Fromm's writing where he counsels us that a society without love, will eventually die. Freire too, suggests love is the basis of revolutionary emancipatory practice (Freire, 2013: 37). He argues that education is itself an act of love, that educators must risk acts of love, and that education should aim at establishing a world where it would be easier to love. In embedding a loving practice into our everyday, these authors build a case for a love that is lively, forceful, and inspiring, while at the same time, critical, challenging, and insistent. For Freire this meant a deeply reflective interpretation of the dialectical relationship between our

cultural existence as individuals and our political and economic existence as social beings (Freire, 1993). The idea of love is as a powerful tool to remake connections, which are lost in the de-humanising of social relations by capitalism. Thus, there is an understanding that love can be the antithesis to the liberal economy predicated as it is on relationship of privacy, exclusion and inequality, love compels us to foster equality.

As Bauman (2005) has argued, one of the greatest contemporary social evils is the total marketization and individualisation of our lived experience. In this work he suggests that the last forty years of social, political and economic reform under the zeitgeist of neo-liberalism has seen the burden of care from the state to the individual. After decades of neo-liberal globalisation and increasing austerity, welfare is more conditional than ever, and the consequences for the most vulnerable populations is more acute, particularly those who cannot navigate the increasingly conditional social relationships. Austerity imposed a shrinking of budgets and services, and this is the reality for both the statutory as well as the NGO sector (Lavalette and Ferguson, 2018). Metrics have been introduced and anything which cannot easily be quantified is discarded. Time has been one of the greatest casualties of this new period, the time that people actually need to build trust and bonds with the people they are supporting.

Conclusion

Clearly love is a highly contested field. My intention in writing this paper was to try and understand the idea of a love ethic as part of a working practice that is both radical and transformative. This research confirms the importance of this discussion, and its place in practice. What was highlighted in the discussion is the fundamental importance of the quality of the relationship between practitioner and service user. The simple basics of the work at the Joanna Project is the need to build positive relationships based on unconditional positive regard for another human being. The research confirmed that for this group of marginalised and stigmatised women, simply valuing that person for themselves is an important act of humanity, and helps in that moment to give back some dignity or love that life on the streets may have stripped away. Furthermore, embracing a radical professional love ethic in practice

can also be read as an act of resistance against prevailing neoliberal orthodoxy. The Joanna Project offers us another model. In their refusal to operate the standard metrics of care, and by focussing in its place on the importance of building loving relationships the Joanna Project shows us there are other ways of being professional and offering high quality supportive services.

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